

Precisionist Perspectives



P R I N T S A N D D R A W I N G S

The works in this exhibition were selected by Susan Lubowsky, Branch Director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center. Special thanks are extended to David Kiehl for sharing his expertise, and to Ani Boyajian and Sonya Rubinow, who coordinated various aspects of this exhibition.

The Museum and its programs are funded by Philip Morris Companies Inc.

Cover:
LOUIS LOZOWICK
Minneapolis, 1925

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Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

March 2–April 28, 1988

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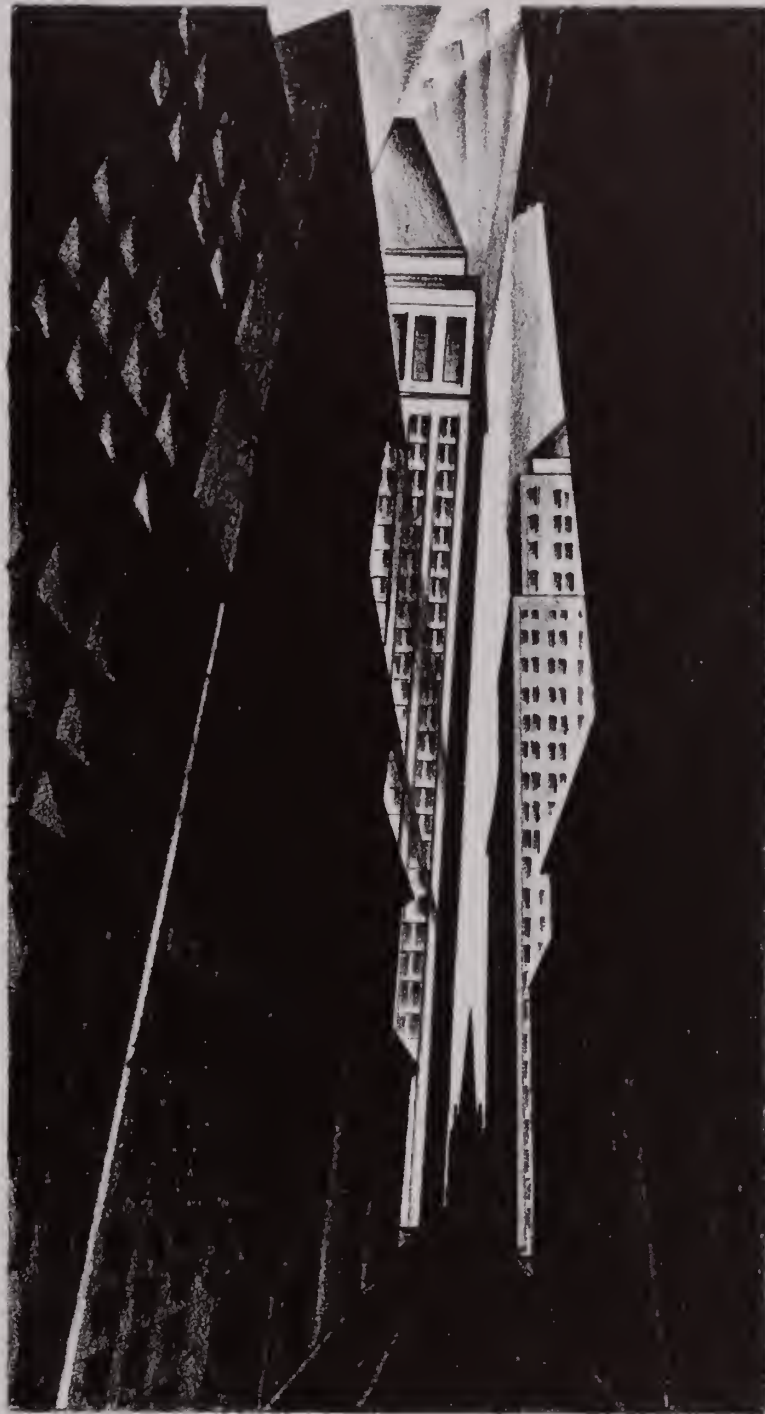
PRINTS AND DRAWINGS

During the 1920s, the resurgence of interest in graphic arts in America had particular impact on the Precisionists, who produced a vast body of works on paper both as studies for and adjuncts to their carefully wrought paintings. Drawings were often highly developed and could be sold as finished works, while prints, like Henry Ford's Model T, could be mass produced and widely distributed. The concept of contemporary art as a readily available commodity appealed to the progressive outlook of post-World War I society. As a result, many artists created inexpensive print editions for the general public. Henry Billings' color stencil print *Marine Elements* (1937) originally sold for \$2.75 as an unsigned, unnumbered edition under the auspices of the American Artists Group. The bold, flat surfaces and hard, clean edges characteristic of certain advanced printmaking processes were ideal for depicting Precisionist imagery. As printmaking grew increasingly sophisticated, the Precisionists began to exploit its potential as a modern technology. And it was, in fact, the imagery and philosophy of modern technology that inspired the Precisionist movement.

At the end of the nineteenth century, technological advances had radically altered contemporary life. Nowhere was the impact of mechanization greater than in America,

and by the late teens the nation had been transformed from a rural agrarian society into an urban industrial one. The loosely knit artistic movement that emerged in this climate of economic prosperity and scientific innovation was later identified as Precisionism. Precisionist artists focused on the abstract geometry of the burgeoning industrial landscape. For them, the city was a "nerve center," providing a myriad of spare architectonic images and monolithic forms—skyscrapers, bridges, ports, factories, machines, and steel mills. But the Precisionists also looked backward, inspired by the austere simplicity of American primitive art and artifacts. In their paintings, drawings, and prints, this group of artists depicted the symbols of America and in so doing created the first uniquely American modernist movement.

Precisionism was, nevertheless, the product of European vanguard art movements. Its geometric style was a direct outgrowth of French Cubism; its focus on machinery was informed by Russian Constructivism, English Vorticism, Italian Futurism, and French Dadaism. But if American artists looked first to Europe for avant-garde aesthetics, these very aesthetics had often been inspired by the technology and futuristic excitement of the great American cities. As early as 1883, the Englishman Oscar Wilde



Arnold Ronnebeck
Wall Street, 1925



Armin Landeck
Manhattan Canyon, 1934

declared: "There is no country in the world where machinery is so lovely as in America. . . . It was not until I had seen the waterworks at Chicago that I realized the wonders of machinery; the rise and fall of the steel rods, the symmetrical motion of great wheels is the most beautifully rhythmic thing I have ever seen." In 1913, the French Dadaist painter Francis Picabia, visiting New York for the historic Armory Show, remarked: "France is almost outplayed. It is in America that I believe that the theories of The New Art will hold most tenaciously." Picabia's prediction was borne out over the course of the next three decades, embodied in the spirit of the Precisionist movement.

Unlike their European counterparts, the Precisionists never developed a manifesto or formed a cohesive group. Rather, various labels were attached to this style by critics and historians. During the twenties, the term *Immaculate* was used by the critic Henry McBride to describe the group's pristine imagery and meticulous painting technique; in the forties, those painters who synthesized Analytic Cubism with realism were also referred to as *Cubist Realists* or *Precisionists*. But it was not until "The Precisionist View in American Art" was mounted at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1960 that the movement was commonly acknowledged and officially named.

Although the Precisionists painted independently of each other and developed individually distinct styles, they were generally affiliated with the same progressive galleries. Alfred Stieglitz's 291 was the first and most influential gallery to espouse the creation of an American avant-garde. But Stieglitz limited his attention to Charles Demuth and Georgia O'Keeffe. The Daniel Gallery, Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, the Bourgeois Gallery, the Montross Gallery, the Rehn Gallery, J.B. Neumann's New Art Circle, and the Whitney Studio Club helped establish the careers of other Precisionists. And through the well-known art patron Walter Arensberg, Demuth and Charles Sheeler met the European Dadaists, particularly Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp, in turn, encouraged Jane Heap, publisher of the vanguard magazine *The Little Review*, to organize "The Machine Age Exposition" in 1927. Held at Steinway Hall in New York, it combined the display of art with that of machine technology. An artistic response to the apotheosis of the machine, the exhibition comprised works by Demuth, Duchamp, Sheeler, and Louis Lozowick, who all served on the Artists' Board. Lozowick's enthusiastic catalogue essay, entitled "The Americanization of Art," expressed the optimism of pro-

gressive America and, indirectly, spelled out the Precisionist ideology:

The dominant trend in America of today . . . beneath all the apparent chaos and confusion is towards order and organization which find their outward sign and symbol in the rigid geometry of the American city: in the verticals of its smoke stacks, in the parallels of its car tracks, the squares of its streets, the cubes of its factories, the arch of its bridges, the cylinders of its gas tanks. . . . The history of America is a history of gigantic engineering feats and colossal mechanical constructions. . . . The skyscrapers of New York, the grain elevators of Minneapolis, the steel mills of Pittsburgh . . . give the American cultural epic its diapason.

That same year, the visionary French architect Le Corbusier published a similar reaction to American technology in his treatise *Towards a New Architecture*: “the American grain elevators and factories [are] the magnificent FIRST-FRUITS of the new age. THE AMERICAN ENGINEERS OVERWHELM WITH THEIR CALCULATIONS OUR EXPIRING ARCHITECTURE.” Likewise, he saw the steamship as “an important manifestation of temerity, of discipline, of harmony, of a beauty that is calm, vital, and strong. . . . The steamship is the first stage in the realization of a world organized according to the new spirit.” It was these icons of industrial America that formed the core of Precisionist imagery.

Between the mid-1920s and the 1940s, the industrial landscape and the great Eastern megalopolis were among the most popular subjects in American graphic arts. Even artists who were not generally associated with Precisionism often adopted its themes. New York, in particular, became the focus of hundreds of prints and drawings by Lozowick, Sheeler, Howard Cook, Niles Spencer, Joseph Stella, as well as by lesser-known figures such as Armin Landeck, Paul Landacre, William C. McNulty, Arnold Ronnebeck, and Benton Spruance. As the skyline grew to epic proportions, New York became known as the “unbelievable city” or the “gigantic fairyland.” Lozowick’s 1925 lithograph *New York* recalls a mammoth Futurist steeplechase with the Brooklyn Bridge as its roller coaster. For Lozowick, the lithograph lent itself to “ornamental abstraction on the one hand and photographic realism on the other.”

Certainly, the influence of photography is evinced in other portrayals of the city. With the camera, an artist could alter perspective, distorting and foreshortening for dramatic effect. Even those artists who did not actually use a camera were inspired by photographs that exaggerated the dynamism of the new vernacular architecture. Landeck



William C. McNulty
The Whirlpool, c. 1930



Joseph Stella
Sketch for Brooklyn Bridge, n.d.

in *Manhattan Canyon* (1934), Ronnebeck in *Wall Street* (1925), and McNulty in *The Whirlpool* (c. 1930), all look down from above, into the interstices of the city. In contrast, Cook and Sheeler, in *Central Park South* (1929) and *Delmonico Building* (1926), respectively, look up from street level at the buildings' imposing planar façades. Much of Sheeler's urban imagery was informed by his experiences as a photographer, both commercially and as a collaborator with Paul Strand on the movie *Manhatta*, produced in 1922. He generally used photographs rather than sketches as studies for paintings, and produced a photographic oeuvre that overwhelmed his output of only six prints.

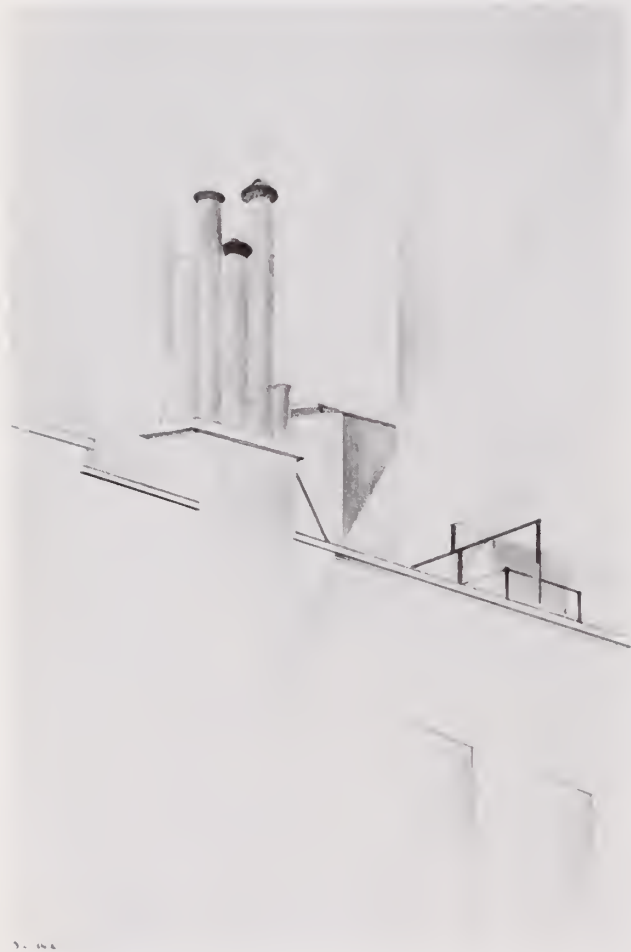
New York City rooftops and the Brooklyn Bridge represented more specific urban themes. Miklos Suba's drawing *Stacks* and Spencer's *Study for Apartment Tower* (1944) comprise the basic elements of the rooftop genre: ventilation pipes, chimneys, parapets, stairheads, and elevator towers. The stylistic range of the Precisionist drawing is exemplified by these disparate works. In *Stacks*, contrasting planes of light and shadow and abstracted "ray lines" that evoke Cubist influence are rendered with delicate precision. *Study for Apartment Tower*, however, is obviously a working drawing—a diagram used to compose the final painting of the same title. A lightly traced grid pattern is superimposed over the boldly outlined building forms, and color notations are penciled in for the artist's reference.

Contrary to the cool rationality associated with Precisionism, Stella's depictions of the Brooklyn Bridge resonate with his passion for "the shrine . . . of the new civilization of AMERICA." Like Lozowick, Stella was greatly influenced by the visceral turbulence of Italian Futurist imagery. The dynamic sweep of the bridge's suspension cables and the frenetic patterns created by their intersecting lines culminate at the arched tower in the center of *Sketch for Brooklyn Bridge*. An impression of stained glass is imparted by the linear elements, rendered in heavy black pastel, and the flat blue areas of sky glimpsed through them. Stella's mystical orientation is revealed by this and similar studies. He recorded his initial response to the bridge in the literary journal *transition* (1929) under the title "The Brooklyn Bridge (A Page of My Life)": "Seen for the first time, as a weird metallic Apparition. . . I felt deeply moved, as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the presence of a new DIVINITY."

By the 1920s, the factory had replaced the cathedral as the nation's spiritual center, and its image proliferated in



Charles Sheeler
Delmonico Building, 1926



Miklos Suba
Stacks, n.d.

Precisionist works. To Henry Adams, visiting the Hall of Dynamos at the Paris World's Exposition in 1900, "the dynamo was a revelation, a symbol of infinity . . . a moral force . . . one began to pray to it." A number of Precisionists observed the temples of industrialization firsthand. In 1908, Stella was commissioned by *Survey* to illustrate Pittsburgh's steel mills and technology immediately became a viable subject for the American artist. What began as a commercial assignment became a vital discovery of the "beauty lying in the arabesque forms given by the structures of those huge volcano-like steel mills." Almost twenty years later, Elsie Driggs was similarly awed at the Jones and Laughlin steel mills: "The particles of dust in the air seemed to catch and refract the light to make a backdrop of luminous pale grey behind the shapes of simple smoke stack and cone. To me it was Greek. What I went to see was a sight a Greco would have enjoyed painting. What . . . I painted when I returned was *Pittsburgh*." Driggs' two preparatory pencil drawings, *Images of Pittsburgh* and *Study for Blast Furnace*, were both executed to record her impressions in 1927. But the delicacy of her tightly controlled line belies the power of the structures she depicted. Instead, her drawings impart a lyrical and poetic quality to the furnaces. In the final painting, however, this delicacy is overwhelmed by dim colors and weighty forms.

The following year, Driggs depicted the Ford Motor Company plant in a preparatory drawing and a painting, both entitled *River Rouge Plant* (1928). Sheeler, too, traveled to Detroit in 1927, commissioned to photograph the same plant. His photographs inspired a body of work in other media, including the famous series of paintings of the plant and the lithograph *Industrial Series, No. 1* (1928), based on a watercolor. Ironically, the sketchy immediacy of the lithograph gives the impression that it was drawn on site, which of course was not the case. Sheeler's work received a great deal of critical attention, and even the *New York Daily Worker* commented, albeit rather sarcastically: "Sheeler approaches the industrial landscape . . . with the same sort of piety Fra Angelico used toward angels. . . . In revealing the beauty of factory architecture, Sheeler has become the Raphael of the Fords."

The Precisionist movement was born of the optimism of America during the teens; it ended with World War II, as enchantment with industrialization turned to disillusionment at the dawn of the nuclear age. In their later careers, Crawford and Spencer turned to abstraction, Stella to mysticism, and Lozowick to Social Realism.



Elsie Driggs
Study for *Blast Furnace*, 1927

Sheeler alone continued to receive critical attention as a Precisionist. *Architectural Cadences*, a color serigraph, was printed in 1954 when he was seventy-one years old. Adapted from the painting of the same title, it amalgamated achitectonic forms in pale discordant colors. Like much of his late work, the silkscreen pushes toward abstraction, but lacks the vitality of earlier experiments with similar imagery.

By the late 1940s, Abstract Expressionism began to dominate the American art scene, and its painterly, emotive character sounded the death knell for the hard-edged, industrial Precisionist aesthetic. With the notable exception of the exhibition at the Walker Art Center in 1960, it is only in the past decade that attention has again been focused on the Precisionist group and that their accomplishments have been recognized by the art establishment.

Of the numerous exhibitions since the late seventies, "Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography," organized in 1982 by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, was the most comprehensive. More recently, the Whitney Museum has mounted a number of important retrospectives—the current exhibition was planned in conjunction with "Ralston Crawford" (1986) and "Charles Demuth" (1987), and runs concurrently with "Charles Sheeler" (organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and "George Ault" (at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center). In this climate of revisionist art history, Precisionism has now been recognized as our first indigenous modernist art form.

SUSAN LUBOWSKY



Niles Spencer
Study for *Apartment Tower*, 1944

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width.

DRAWINGS

Ralston Crawford (1906–1978)

Untitled, c. 1935

Charcoal and pencil on paper, 7½ x 10
Collection of Neelon Crawford

Buffalo Grain Elevators, c. 1937

Pencil, ink, and watercolor on paper,
16 x 20

Collection of John Crawford

Barn Forms No. 2, 1938

Conté on paper, 9½ x 13¾

Collection of Neelon Crawford

Pennsylvania Barn, 1938

Pencil on paper, 9⅝ x 14

Collection of Neelon Crawford

Charles Demuth (1883–1935)

Provincetown, 1918

Watercolor, pencil, and black chalk
on paper, 14 x 9⅞

Collection of Dorothea G. Demuth

Courthouse Dome, 1921

Pencil on paper, 11 x 8⅝

The Demuth Foundation, Lancaster,
Pennsylvania; Gift: Junior League of
Lancaster

Elsie Driggs (b. 1898)

Images of Pittsburgh, 1927

Pencil on paper, 12 x 13⅜

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; 50th Anniversary Gift of
Mr. and Mrs. Julian Foss 80.6.4

Study for Blast Furnace, 1927

Pencil on paper, 12 x 18

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; 50th Anniversary Gift of
Mr. and Mrs. Julian Foss 80.6.2

Study for River Rouge Plant, 1928

Pencil on paper, 18 x 12

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; 50th Anniversary Gift of
Mr. and Mrs. Julian Foss 80.6.1

Louis Lozowick (1892–1973)

Machine Ornament, c. 1925–27

India ink on paper, 18¼ x 12

Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York; Purchase, with funds from the
Neysa McMein Purchase Award and
Barbara Babcock Millhouse 82.24

Morton Schamberg (1881–1918)

Composition, 1916

Pastel and pencil on paper, 16 x 10½
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.,
New York

Composition, 1916

Pastel and pencil on paper, 7½ x 8
Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, Inc.,
New York

Niles Spencer (1893–1952)

Study for Apartment Tower, 1944

Pencil on paper, 13¼ x 11

Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York; Gift of Mrs. Harry A. Reffelt
72.127

Joseph Stella (1877–1946)

New York Interpreted: The Bridge,
c. 1920–22

Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper,
40⅜ x 15⅝

Richard York Gallery, New York

Sketch for Brooklyn Bridge, n.d.

Pastel on paper, 21 x 17½

Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York; Gift of Miss Rose Fried 52.36

Miklos Suba (1880–1944)

Stacks, n.d.

Pencil on paper, 7⅝ x 5

Collection of Harry L. Koenigsberg

PRINTS

James E. Allen (1894–1964)

Oil Refinery I, c. 1940

Lithograph: sheet, 17¾ x 13; image,
14⅝ x 9⅜

Mary Ryan Gallery, New York

Henry Billings (b. 1901)

Marine Elements, 1937

Stencil print: sheet, 16 x 22; image,
8⅞ x 14

Collection of David W. Kiehl

Howard Cook (1901–1980)

Central Park South, 1929

Wood engraving: sheet, 117/8 x 91/8;
image, 83/4 x 71/4

The New York Public Library, Astor,
Lenox and Tilden Foundations; Print
Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
Division of Art, Prints and Photographs

Edison Plant, 1930

Lithograph: sheet, 18 x 14; image,
131/16 x 913/16

Susan Sheehan Inc., New York

Engine Room, 1930

Lithograph: sheet, 1513/16 x 181/8; image,
101/8 x 123/16

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Purchase, with funds from
the Print Committee 86.25

Lower Manhattan, 1930

Lithograph: sheet, 153/8 x 111/4; image,
14 x 10

The New York Public Library, Astor,
Lenox and Tilden Foundations; Print
Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
Division of Art, Prints and Photographs

Times Square Sector, 1930

Etching: sheet, 15 x 13; image, 12 x 915/16

Susan Sheehan Inc., New York

Albert Heckman (1893–1971)

Gas and Oil Tanks, 1935

Lithograph: sheet, 1813/16 x 1513/16; image,
515/16 x 97/8

Collection of Beth and James DeWoody

Paul Landacre (1893–1963)

The Press, 1934

Wood engraving: sheet, 141/2 x 103/16;
image, 81/2 x 81/4

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick R.
Mayer

Armin Landeck (1905–1984)

Manhattan Canyon, 1934

Etching: sheet, 173/4 x 103/8; image,
14 x 613/16

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York; Stewart S. MacDermott
Fund, 1975

Louis Lozowick (1892–1973)

Minneapolis, 1925

Lithograph: sheet, 1515/16 x 11; image,
115/8 x 813/16

Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York; Gift of the Dain Gallery 72.51

New York, 1925

Lithograph: sheet, 151/8 x 113/8; image,
119/16 x 9

Whitney Museum of American Art, New
York; Purchase, with funds from the
John I.H. Baur Purchase Fund 77.12

Doorway to the Street, 1929

Lithograph: sheet, 17 x 10; image,
14 x 615/16

Susan Sheehan Inc., New York

Tanks #2, 1929

Lithograph: sheet, 181/8 x 13; image,
145/8 x 9

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Purchase 31.946

William C. McNulty (1884–1963)

The Whirlpool, c. 1930

Etching: sheet, 16 x 101/2; image,
131/2 x 7

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel
L. Rosenfeld 78.113

Otis Oldfield (1890–1969)

From the Bay Bridge Series, 1937

Lithograph: sheet, 185/16 x 141/8; image,
127/16 x 101/8

Collection of Beth and James DeWoody

Arnold Ronnebeck (1885–1947)

Brooklyn Bridge, 1925

Lithograph: sheet, 16 x 111/4; image,
121/2 x 61/2

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel
L. Rosenfeld 78.114

Wall Street, 1925

Lithograph: sheet, 153/4 x 111/4; image,
121/4 x 63/4

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel
L. Rosenfeld 78.111

William S. Schwartz (1896–1977)

Cityscape #16, 1928

Lithograph: sheet, 21 x 155/8; image,
195/8 x 141/4

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick R.
Mayer

Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)

Barns, 1918

Lithograph: sheet, 22 x 28; image,
197/8 x 255/8

Susan Sheehan Inc., New York

Delmonico Building, 1926

Lithograph: sheet, 14 x 11; image,
93/4 x 63/4

Susan Sheehan Inc., New York

Industrial Series, No. 1, 1928

Lithograph: sheet, 111/4 x 157/8; image,
81/8 x 111/8

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Purchase 31.807

Architectural Cadences, 1954

Serigraph: sheet, 73/4 x 10; image,
61/4 x 83/4

Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York; Purchase 74.23

Benton Spruance (1904–1967)

Design for America, No. 1, 1935

Lithograph: sheet, 227/8 x 16; image,
161/2 x 91/2

Collection of Beth and James DeWoody

Harry Sternberg (b. 1904)

Steel Mill, n.d.

Lithograph: sheet, 135/8 x 191/2; image,
101/4 x 163/8

The New York Public Library, Astor,
Lenox and Tilden Foundations; Print
Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach
Division of Art, Prints and Photographs

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pp. 7 and 8, by Geoffrey Clements.

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